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The Wabash and Its Valley

Part I—The Earlier History

ONE who delves among old books and documents that bear upon early Indiana history is struck by the fact that a great and, in some respects, a peculiar interest attaches to the Wabash River and the region that it waters. Next to the Mississippi and Ohio it, more than any other Western stream, seems to have commanded the attention of old-time travelers, its relation to the St. Lawrence water system giving it an importance hardly appreciated to-day by those who are not students of history and of former conditions.

A glance at the map will show the magnitude of the Wabash, as compared with other Indiana rivers. Traversing the State in a great arc from the northeast part to the southwest extremity, it covers, counting its bends, more than five hundred miles. When we reflect that its valley is a tract of that extent, in some places many miles wide, and originally of unsurpassed fertility, we can realize its ultimate agricultural importance; but long before that day the river itself had a supreme value. Along its course were the very beginners of Indiana history, and for reasons that are intimately inwoven with the larger history of the country.

From the lofty tower of the court house in Fort Wayne one has a fine bird's-eye view not only of the third largest city in Indiana, but of a much wider sweep of territory which circles about with a visible radius of perhaps ten miles. Down in the town, from the midst of trees and buildings, occasional glimpses may be had of the three rivers—the St. Mary's, the St. Joseph and the Maumee—that find their union here, on the summit of the great water-shed. To north and south and east the eye may trace their three valleys. Westward a level, al-

most treeless, depression like the ancient bed of yet another river, stretches to the blue distance.

To the instructed observer this topography tells a most interesting story. Eastward of him gently dips the broad Erie basin, sending its waters to the sea by Lake Erie, Niagara and the St. Lawrence. On the other hand, a few miles across the prairie-like expanse spoken of, and almost within sight, lies a tributary of the beautiful Wabash, and beyond it the vast slope of the Mississippi Valley, down which the lordly rivers merge in a general highway to the far-off Gulf of Mexico.

The near approach to each other here of these two great water systems which thread the land through various latitudes for perhaps three thousand miles, binding together the remote parts of the continent, must be appreciated to understand the peculiar interest that attaches to the spot. By referring to a map of this region it may be seen that the St. Mary's and St. Joseph Rivers, which send their waters to Lake Erie, do not flow from the west, but toward the west till they meet, then, by an unusual dip of the surface, they run back eastward to the Maumee, down a trough that lies between the two valleys of the first-named streams. The branches of the Wabash flow from the same direction as do the branches of the Maumee, but continue westward. Moreover, the Maumee and its two oblique tributaries form a sort of arrow head, which, intruding among the Wabash tributaries, thus make the two systems interlock and approach at their nearest points to within a few miles of each other. The important feature of it is that this interlocking is not of insignificant headwaters, as usually happens, but the nearest point of approach is where the streams on both sides are navigable. Back of all this lies a fascinating geologic story—the story of a vast retreating glacier, shaped not unlike the prow of a mighty ship, that, as it halted and retreated and anon halted, built up successive lines of morainic breastworks that determined the courses of the rivers and drew together the two systems as above described.*

* For fullest exposition of this theory see Sixteenth Geological Report of Ind.; Charles R. Dryer's chapter on Allen County.

Under the old methods of transportation, when the navigable rivers were of paramount importance, the immense advantages of this spot where the seaboard met the Mississippi Valley were fully recognized by various masters of the place. Its military value alone was such that through three successive periods the French, the English and the Americans commanded with military posts this portage where, by a carry of some nine miles, troops might have easy ingress to the territory which otherwise was almost inaccessible. Anthony Wayne, indeed, regarded it as "the key to the Northwest." Subsequently it came to have a commercial value which made the early growth of Fort Wayne, and before the white man's advent his aboriginal predecessors had pitched their lodges there for similar reasons, the city just named being antedated by a Miami village known as Kekionga. A squaw, the mother of the Chief Richardville, who had preceded him as the ruler of her tribe, is said to have amassed a fortune from tolls exacted from the traders who used the portage; Little Turtle, the great war chief, was not less thrifty, and when the whites succeeded to the holding a flourishing business was carried on with carriers and pack-horses. At the treaty of Greenville, in 1795, after the subjugation of the northwestern tribes by Anthony Wayne, Little Turtle pleaded for a continued interest in the portage. This region, he contended, had always belonged to the Miamis, and in one of his speeches he speaks of it as "the glorious gate * * * through which all the good words of our chiefs had to pass from the North to the South, and from the East to the West. * * * This carrying place," he said again, "has heretofore proved in a great degree, the subsistence of your younger brothers. That place has brought to us, in the course of one day, the amount of one hundred dollars."* The explanation of this is that the Twightwees, or Miamis proper, the dominant tribe of the great Miami confederacy, held many councils here with visiting tribes—hence "the glorious gate * * * through which all the good words of our chiefs had to pass," while for the use of

* Dillon, pp. 368, 369.

the portage by traders the holders exacted tribute or toll, thus levying what might be called the first tariff on imports. General Wayne, in answering this part of Little Turtle's plea, used an argument not altogether unknown at the present day. "Let us inquire," he said, "who, in fact, paid the heavy contribution. It is true the traders bore it in the first instance; but they laid it on the goods, and the Indians of the Wabash really and finally paid it."*

Another interesting fact in connection with this portage was the utilizing of beaver dams on Little River. When the water was low these were broken away and the boats of the voyagers carried down with the increased floods. The witless animals would industriously repair the breaches thus made, quite unconscious of the part they were playing in man's traffic†

With the coming of the explorer and the fur trader the Wabash begins a new phase of history. Just when the first white man's canoe traversed its winding miles is a matter of speculation. Some historians have put it as early as 1680 and some as late as 1735 and even 1750. Some of the earlier chart-makers confused it with the Ohio, and on one French map, dated 1720, we find a stream rising in a good-sized lake near the east end of Lake Erie, flowing thence through what is now northern Ohio, and finally trending southwest to the Mississippi. This is called "OUABACHE AUTREMT APPELLEE OHIO OU BELLE RIVIERE." By 1742 the two rivers are differentiated, but flow parallel with each other, not very far apart, and by 1784 the Wabash is laid down with considerable accuracy. The stream was at one time christened St. Jerome and is so called on a few of the maps, but the name did not stick, and it was generally designated as the "Ouabache." This was the French spelling of an Indian word from an Algonquin stem, wabi or wapi, which meant white‡. In time it became anglicized into Wabash, which is not far removed

* Dillon, p. 371.

† Dunn's Indiana, p. 114.

‡ Dunn, p. 14.

from the Indian "Wabba-shikka," that is attached to it in Hough's map, giving the Indian names of rivers.*

Hard after the first explorers came the French fur traders. The most lucrative and most immediate returns promised by the wilderness of the new world were in the skins of its wild animals, and capitalists were swift to draw upon this source of wealth. Large companies were formed and these established their agents along with the military posts which France planted across her vast new territory from the lakes to the gulf. Three of these settlements, military and commercial, were located on the Wabash—one at the Miami village of Kekionga, where Fort Wayne now stands; one called Ouia-tenon, among the Wea Indians, below the present site of Lafayette, and one among the Piankeshaws, eventually known as Vincennes. To these posts the Indians from far and near brought their peltries, exchanging them for commodities dear to the savage heart, and from here they were sent to the great fur houses in upper Canada. Communication between these remote points was effected by the famous COUREURS DES BOIS, the carriers of the woods, who were the forerunners of the steamboat and the freight train. The reign of these wild, lawless and care-free rangers adds a picturesque gleam to the history of the beautiful Wabash. To quote the words of J. P. Dunn: "They were the most romantic and poetic characters ever known in American frontier life. Their every movement attracts the rosiest coloring of imagination. We see them gliding along the streams in their long canoes. * * * We catch afar off the thrilling cadence of their choruses, floating over prairie and marsh, echoing from forest and hill, startling the buffalo from his haunt in the reeds; telling the drowsy denizens of the posts of the approach of revelry, and whispering to the Indian village of gaudy fabrics, of trinkets and of firewater. * * * Another night they have reached the little post and we are overwhelmed by the confusion of chattering, laughing, singing and bargaining."†

* Indiana Geological Report, 1882.

† Dunn, p. 91.

With all this gaiety, however, the lot of the VOYAGEUR was by no means an easy one. His food was such as few civilized men could live on, a day's ration being simply a quart of hulled corn and a pint of bear's grease, while a ceaseless plying of the paddle from dawn till dusk could not have been less laborious than the toil of the Roman galley slave, whose task has become a synonym for hard work.

The favorite craft of these carriers was the *pirouge*, a large canoe made from the hollowed trunks of trees, propelled with paddles by four men. Coming they bore coarse blue and red cloths, fine scarlet, guns, powder, balls, knives, hatchets, traps, kettles, ribbons, beads, vermilion, tobacco, spirituous liquors, etc.* Returning, they carried back, as a load, some forty packs of skins weighing about one hundred pounds each, and that the exchange of the cargoes proved profitable to the traders we can readily believe when told that the Indians were charged at the rate of four dollars a hundred for bullets.

Of the three Wabash settlements named, two, Ouiatenon and the one at Kekionga, were never more than mere posts, consisting of traders and their families, and the little garrison maintained by the French government. An old document published by the Indiana Historical Society, which has been called "The First Census of Indiana," gives the names of the heads of families at these points, there being nine at Fort Miami (Fort Wayne), and twelve at Ouiatenon. These, with sixty-six names at Vincennes, represented the white population of our territory in 1769. Colonel Croghan, an officer in the British service, who was captured by the Kickapoo Indians and carried up the Wabash in 1765, describes Kekionga as forty or fifty Indian cabins and nine or ten French houses occupied by a runaway colony from Detroit.

Of Fort Ouiatenon, which, in all probability, was the first settlement in Indiana, information is so meager that the historians have waged a spirited controversy as to its site. A few years ago a skeleton in the remnants of a French uniform, along with some silver crucifixes, utensils and various frag-

* Dillon, p. 20.

ments of military equipments were dug up on the north bank of the river near the mouth of Wea creek, which would seem to determine the spot. During the French occupancy this post, situated in the very heart of the fur country, did a thriving business, the annual trade being estimated at £8,000, but after the English conquest it was gradually abandoned.

The date of the founding of Vincennes is also involved in obscurity, and there has been not a little ingenious but barren speculation upon the subject. Dillon suggests 1702, Dunn 1727 and Bancroft about 1716. The names that attached to it in the earlier days were various. It is first mentioned as the "Post du Ouabache," which became contracted into *au poste*, and this in turn, when the American settlers came, was corrupted into *Opost*. It has also been referred to as "the post of Pianguichats" and "L. (little) Wiaut." Sometimes it took its name from St. Ange, the first commandant, and from this was anglicised into Fort St. Anne, or Fort Anne. It finally became Post St. Vincent, and then Vincennes, in honor of its founder, *Sieur De Vincennes*. Vincennes was not a surname, but a title appertaining to one of the Canadian fiefs, this successor to it being *Francoise Morgane*.

Unlike *Ouiatenon*, Vincennes, almost from the first, had in it the elements of permanence. Peopled by emigrants from New Orleans, Kaskaskia and various parts of Canada, it was an agricultural community in a crude way, and here, shut off from civilization by untrod leagues of wilderness, they led a shiftless, indolent, contented life, still retaining the customs and gaieties of *La Belle France* and adding to their costumes and house furnishings a picturesqueness borrowed of the Indians. There were few iron workers among them, and their implements of husbandry were of the most primitive kind. The rich Wabash lands returned them a subsistence with a minimum of toil; the more well-to-do class held slaves who relieved them of that little toil, and so there was an abundance of time for the consumption of tobacco and snuff and home-made wines; for the keeping of holidays and the indulgence of the French passion for social intercourse and amusements. Among other things we learn, incidentally, of billiard tables

among them, though how they were transported thither we are left to imagine. Being of the Roman Catholic faith, these easy-going souls were not called upon to solve religious problems, and they were quite as free from responsibility and worry in political affairs. The commandant was king in a small way and the grand arbiter in all matters pertaining to the community. They carried on some commerce with New Orleans, sending thither flour, pork, hides, etc., and bringing back sugar, metal goods and fabrics.

For more than half a century this isolated little community flourished, or rather, perhaps, "vegetated" here, untouched by outer influences, but the English acquisition of the West was the beginning of the end for them. Their first realization of the seriousness of the change, perhaps, was in 1772, when General Gage, commander of the English forces in America, issued a proclamation which, treating them as mere squatters, ordered them to leave the Indian country and retire to "the colonies of his Majesty." The poor French, in great consternation, returned a remonstrance, claiming that they had their lands by "sacred titles." Gage, with a show of justice, demanded circumstantial proof of the validity of each title, and as the careless holders had not taken the pains to preserve their documents they were put to their wits end. Eventually, the British ministry not supporting Gage's measures, the matter was adjusted and his Majesty's new subjects allowed to remain on their old claims, where, in time, they were all but obliterated by an alien people; though to the present day there are reminders in Vincennes of the old French occupancy. Of these three French settlements, Ouiatenon and Fort Miami were in the territory of Canada and subject to that government, while Vincennes was in Louisiana, the border line crossing the Wabash about where Terre Haute now stands.

When, in the fullness of time, the country again changed hands, and, after the stirring events of the Revolution, attention was turned to the great new territory west of the Alleghenies, the importance of the Wabash was still recognized. General Wayne, according to the knowledge current in his

day, was sagacious and far-seeing. In his famous Indian campaign he planted a fort at the head of the Maumee where the French and English had built their forts before; and in the treaty at Greenville, following that campaign, he stipulated for a tract six miles square where Fort Wayne stood; one two miles square on Little River (the Wabash tributary), at the other side of the portage; one six miles square at Ouiatenon, and lands lying about Vincennes to which the Indian title had been extinguished. In addition it provided for a free navigation of the Wabash, believing that to be of the greatest military importance to the territory the river threaded. The control of the portage at the head of navigation was the control of the door to that territory, and hence his designation of the spot as "the key to the Northwest." Had not the locomotive become a factor in the trend of affairs it is more than probable that Wayne's wisdom would have been proven by time.

A word of post-mortem history touching the doughty veteran who wrested this spot from the red man and established his name here may not be amiss. Wayne, as may be learned from any standard biography of him, died where Erie, Pa., is now located, not long after his conquest of the Northwestern tribes. There he lay buried for thirteen years, when his son removed the remains to the old home place in Chester county, Pennsylvania. Further particulars are not, I believe, given in any of the "lives," but some twenty-five years ago a fugitive article afloat in the press added some gruesome details to the established account.* According to this the son came over the mountains on his sepulchral errand in a small sulky. When his father's body was disinterred it was found to be in an excellent state of preservation. To transport it thus on the sulky was impossible, and a Dr. John C. Wallace, one of Wayne's old companions in arms, overcame the difficulty by boiling the body, thus separating the flesh from the bones. The flesh was returned to the original grave and the bones, strapped in a box to the sulky, were taken home and re-buried. Thus the dust of the hero of Stony Point has the anomalous distinction of occupying two graves. Over the bones a monument was erected. The first grave was forgotten for many years, when some digger for relics unearthed a coffin lid, with the initials A. W. and the figures of Wayne's age and date of death formed by brass-headed nails.

[Concluded Next Number.]

G. S. C.